



## Women doing theology: Individual voices in chorus

Sometimes I remain silent in a choir of only male voices. At other times, like a young inexperienced singer pushed into the limelight too soon, I burst into tears after singing only a few bars. Frequently I feel overwhelmed by stronger voices and so become silent. Sometimes I sing in the shower where no one will hear my own shrill notes and plaintive melodies.

Only occasionally do I feel the exhilaration that comes when my voice spontaneously and without apology enters fully into a choir of diverse voices singing a new song. Only occasionally do I know that I have found my place and entered the rhythm fully. Only occasionally do I know when I must lead and when I must support a different voice as it soars above the others.

When I was given the assignment to compile an issue of *Women's Concerns Report* focused on theology, the imagery of music making came to mind as a way of expressing my experience as a theologian in the Mennonite church. I have not found it easy to see how my personal identity, unique experiences and particular gifts could interact creatively

with the broader community and its dominant patterns of theology. I have discovered political patterns and authority structures that I did not know existed. It has been hurtful to be accused of individualism when the notes and rhythms that I was initiating were intended to make the melody more beautiful and the harmony richer.

It is probably not surprising that I chose a theme for this issue that expresses some of my own searchings and frustrations. But the theme was also triggered by the papers presented at the "Mennonite Voices in Dialogue: Women Doing Theology" conference held in Bluffton, Ohio, in June 1994. Beneath the vigorous discussion, the story telling and the worship I could hear the voices, at times almost inaudible, asking, "Does my story count?" In our search for community and for unity we are not sure what to do with these voices that do not easily fit the community pattern, even if that pattern is determined by the voices of women.

In the Mennonite church I have heard much about a theology of community. After all, community was one of the three basic platforms of Anabaptism as interpreted by H.S. Bender in *The Anabaptist Vision*. Together with the other two norms of discipleship and peace, community has been a shorthand way of referring to the basics of Christian life for an Anabaptist Mennonite. This theology of community focused on the separation of the church from the world. But it also included the idea of the subordination of the individual to the community.

It is easy for women who value relationships to assume that this theology of community is not open to critique. However, if we listen to the quieter voices in our midst, we will realize that the hierarchical ranking of community over the individual has been used to





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quelch dissident voices and to support compliance and conformity within our churches. This is especially so when community is not defined in terms of the quality of the relationship between people, but rather in terms of a valuing of the group over against the individual. When God's voice is equated with the voice of a specific community, space is created for domination and oppression. The notion of community then supports an ethos that does not allow us to name the power struggles, to confess the domination of authoritarian leaders, and to seek healing for our own self-abasement as well as for our pride.

Historically the authority of the particular church congregation has been important to Anabaptist Mennonites in their power struggles with government and the established church. Community support encouraged individual members to be non-conformed to the society around them. However the priority of the community has also meant the privileging of powerful voices over minority voices.

Sometimes it has meant that mutual accountability became only brotherly admonition. At other times it has meant that the particular racial or ethnic identity of a member had to be minimized in order to fit the community pattern. A quick look at the kind of discipline issues which take our time, at the type of songs which dominate our hymn books or at the kind of menus that are the rule at our church suppers confirms the power of the majority in determining the ethos of the community.

During the Reformation, adult baptism signified both individual protest against the dominating authority of the church as well as individual commitment to a particular community of faith. But beyond that, baptism was to witness to the Lordship of Christ to whom ultimate allegiance was to be given. No human authority, whether community or individual, was to be given final authority. Critique and commitment became close companions in the search to do God's will.

Anabaptist Mennonites who have a history of speaking up about the misuse of power in society have only lately begun to speak up about this same misuse within the church community. Very little systematic analysis has been made of the power and institutionalized inequities operative in interpersonal relationships within the church. By stressing the church as a prophetic voice to the world we may have forgotten to value the lone prophetic voice in our midst. By emphasizing commitment to the community we may have forgotten to stress the freedom in Christ that comes to each member.

The dualism in our theology that has allowed us to pit individual against community has not created a healthy relationship between members in the community. Those who assume personal autonomy and represent community power often do not understand the domination that this represents to those who feel powerless and marginalized in the community. There is a need to look again at our theology and ask how it can function to bring healing to both individuals and community.

These concerns shaped the questions posed to the writers in this issue of Report. Do we have a theology that undergirds both our life as community and our life as individuals? Can this theology help us as individual women in our diversity understand our participation in the "we" of Mennonite community? What are the tensions in our theology that arise because each of us is both an individual and a member of a community?

The persons who have contributed to this issue represent diversity in their position in the church structure, in their racial and ethnic identity, in their formal theological training and in their method of doing theology. These women speak of both the pain that comes with being part of a community and the responsibility that community leadership brings to them. As you read these theological "solos" I hope that *you can become* the "chorus" that supports each voice as it seeks its role in God's song. I pray that these voices will encourage you to lead out in song as you hear a new melody that needs to be sung. May our chorus of voices welcome each new member as a gift from God.

—Lydia Neufeld Harder, compiler

Lydia Neufeld Harder is presently the interim director of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. She teaches theology at the center, in the nursery class at Toronto United Mennonite Church and in workshops and retreats in the wider conference. She is married to Gary and is the mother of three grown children.

by Regina Shands Stoltzfus

## Circling song

I heard my daughter singing a song the other day that brought back a flood of childhood memories. When I was a skinny little kid growing up on Cleveland's east side, we played a lot of circle games. Circle games are the ultimate in non-competitive play, which I think is why I liked them so much. Anyway, Rachel was walking around singing "shake it to the east, shake it to the west," part of the game Little Sally Walker.

To play, a group of kids would hold hands and form a ring around one child who played Sally. Slowly circling Sally, who crouched on the ground with her face in her hands, the group would sing:

Little Sally Walker  
Sitting in a saucer  
Weeping and crying  
For someone to love her

After this, the pace would pick up, and as Sally rose to her feet the group sang:

Rise, Sally, rise!  
Dry your weeping eyes  
Put your hands on your hips  
And let your backbone slip

Backbone slipping, for those not familiar with it, is simply the act of swinging your hips from side to side—what little girls might do in order to appear grown up, womanish. (Womanish, a familiar expression in the African American community, is the term from which author Alice Walker coined a similar word—womanist, describing a black feminist or feminist of color.)

Aww, shake it to the east  
Aww, shake it to the west  
Shake it to the very one  
That you love the best.

A new Sally would be chosen, and the game went on until everyone had a chance to slip backbones and shake it, sometimes several times over.



This little game, oddly enough, parallels my thinking on the relationship between individuals and community, of African American women's roles within our society, or my own growth and understanding of myself as a woman of color who also happens to be Mennonite. Sally is in the center, encircled by her community, weeping for someone to love her. As little girls, we assumed Sally wanted a boyfriend or a husband, but the song says for just someone to love her—to recognize, accept and value her. Perhaps Sally felt alone in her saucer because she looked or acted differently from the mainstream—she was an outcast from some place and/or people she wanted to a part of.

However, Sally's immediate community, those who know her and understand her and have stood in her place, surround Sally both physically and with song. Stop weeping. Stand up for yourself and do what you have to do to find your place in this world. Be bold, be downright womanish, and then when you are done, choose someone else to help along the same path.

My mother tried to raise me to be a speak-up-for-myself, a take-charge and if necessary take-over kind of woman, like she is. I don't think I ever heard the words "act like a lady," as in step back and be quiet, fall from her lips. Although I'm not certain how well her lessons took, I know full well the reasons she taught them. She wanted me to be able to take care of myself, to get what I need in life, because the odds were that no one would provide this for me. She never said to me being a woman is hard, or that people would try to mistreat me because I was black. But she made sure I knew the stories that history told, and knew how to step up and assert myself so that I wouldn't fall victim to a hard life or

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cruel treatment, or become invisible. Fight back. Rise up. It is the way I will raise my own daughter.

Yet sometimes it is hard for me to reconcile those lessons of my youth with the messages I get from the larger church regarding us women, especially those of us working in churches or for church agencies. My mother in one ear telling me to speak up, and a chorus of voices in the other saying, women, keep silent. The vision in my mind's eye of my mother demonstrating how to make yourself noticed upon entering a room, and the reality of entering a room, or a sanctuary, or an assembly hall, and being looked over, or looked through. The need to be an individual who looks out for herself, but wondering if acting on that need will make me an outcast in the very community I desire to be a part of, because I am not humble enough, not sacrificing enough—not seen as one willing to suffer and serve.

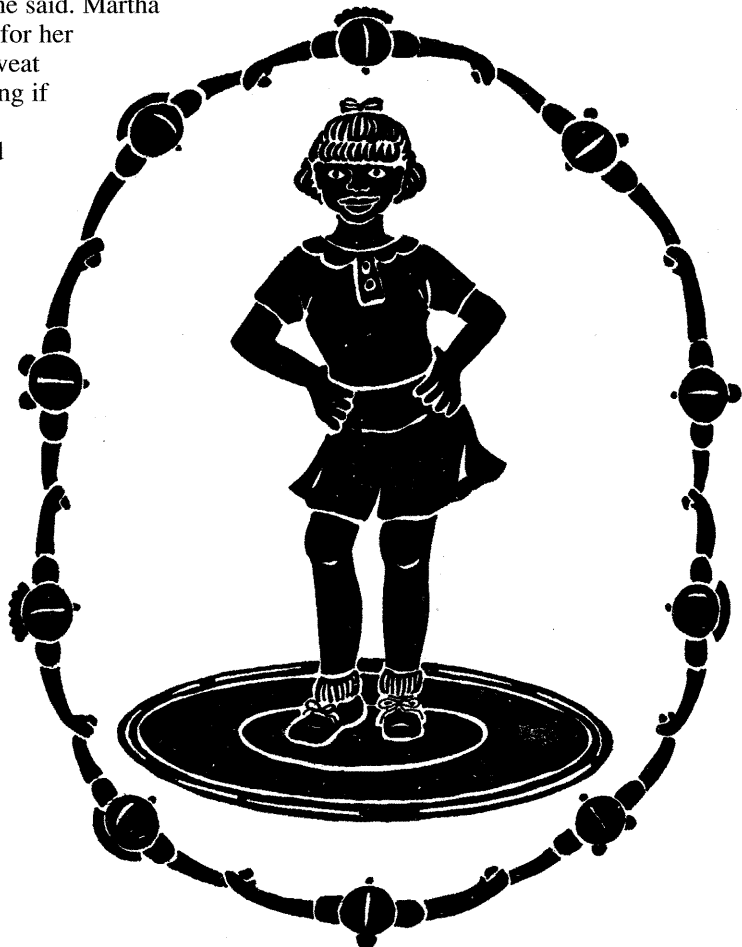
When Jesus came to visit at the home of Mary and Martha, Mary sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said. Martha bustled about in the kitchen, busily preparing for her guests. I imagine her fretting over hot pots, sweat dripping down and burning her eyes, wondering if there are enough utensils for all the visitors, noticing the room still needed to be swept and the tables wiped down, thinking how she could use a hand and her sister has the nerve to be cooling her heels in the next room with Jesus and the disciples. And I imagine Mary probably felt guilty hearing Martha's rattling in the back rooms, her feet hurrying across the floor, pots and pans clanging, perhaps even a long, loud sigh or two. But the chance to learn at the feet of Jesus! How she must have been torn! And humiliated, when Martha comes in and tells the Lord to make Mary help with the housework. And Jesus gives a soft reply. Mary has chosen what is better. Mary seemed selfish to Martha. Perhaps Mary was being selfish. But she was also grabbing an opportunity not available to women before in that time and place, and

perhaps not ever again. Who knew what she was risking, sitting at the feet of Jesus? And worse yet, ignoring (for the moment) the role she was supposed to play, that of the invisible servant. Both Mary and Martha were doing important tasks, but both went unrecognized and unvalued by the people around them.

Mary, in this story, reminds me of me. And I'm filled with nagging self doubt about being in that place, yet Jesus' soft reply gives me hope.

Rise, Sally.  
Rise, Mary.  
Rise, Martha.

**Regina Shands Stoltzfus is staff associate for urban peacemaking with Mennonite Conciliation Service (MCS). A mother of four children, she lives in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, and is a member of the Lee Heights Community Church.**





by Janis E. Nickel

## In the name of harmony voices are lost

“Community” carries images of loving relationships, visions of a better world and gut feelings of nameless oppression. To be Mennonite is to be part of the community. It has defined my being, my perception of the world and of myself—neither of which are particularly positive. As a woman (and I do not try to speak for men) I have experienced both its embrace and its bondage and am keenly aware of our complicity in weaving its web. Instinctively I have tried to escape only to realize that I carry it with me.

My childhood was defined by the community. We knew who was inside, who was outside and where everyone fit within the system. Certain statuses carried certain rank. I was aware that my family was nearer the bottom than the top. Women ranked lower than men. I learned that women were to be taken care of by men and for this we sacrificed will and voice. I learned to fear God and man and to silence selfish dreams. These things were not so much articulated in our home as absorbed from the community which enveloped us. I was not unhappy; there was comfort and a sense of peace in knowing and accepting one's place. I did not know how difficult it would be to dislodge this place from my self. I did not know that I had no defense against abuse. I learned to not speak out, to always be nice, to turn the other cheek, to carry my cross. I was socialized into powerlessness.

Theologically we internalize community and its power. What was experienced as the communal will of the people of God became the will of God “Himself.” At our Mennonite institutes of higher learning, community is promoted and reinforced. The mind is not opened to explore its vast potential but directed down the corridors of the community of faith. Alternative views are not disallowed but, as surely as in shuntings of days gone by, the community exerts itself and our barely-existent selves falter and surrender to its loving embrace.

Soon we all find ourselves fighting against the dangers of individualism, of the self. The self must be voluntarily subordinated to the greater good of relationship, of community, for this is where God is experienced. We may have given up the dark dresses and head coverings that defined the place of women and defined us as a separate

people but the theological community which nudges us into its living stream fixes the definitions in our beings and holds us in its current.

In our churches we are lovingly molded into members of the “body of Christ.” Our foyers, where community is nurtured, are as important as our sanctuaries. God is as present in relationships as in the worship service. I once participated in a church process where a member had not met expectations and we collectively passed judgement. While I had no real problem with this member I soon found myself adding my small complaint to the growing indictment.

Later, I was horrified when I saw how this group process could unleash a mean-spiritedness that none of us would have displayed individually. No one could be held responsible for ostracizing the member. Did it matter if I was not without sin, not fit to throw that little stone? I was but a small cog in a mighty wheel; I was not personally responsible. Power was enhanced by community but responsibility was diffused and weakened. Being a Christian community is no guarantee against un-Christ-like behavior.

Community has become an entity unto itself. It pervades our lives and shapes our beings. Our ancestors may have lived in communities of faith which sought to follow Christ—to bring forth the Kingdom—but community was a means to an end. Community came to separate us from the world, to define us by our “over/againstness.” Its boundaries are a set of beliefs and human behavior which is thought to reflect the nature of God. A way of life in which love and peace could be nurtured now finds itself a theological companion to pacifism and adult baptism. The implication is that community is holy and the individual fails to live up to its perfection. We have seen what the individual sinner can do to damage the community, but we are not yet willing to see how community has shaped that sinner.

The papers presented at the “Women doing Theology” conference generally depicted community as a positive force, albeit with the failures brought to it by human weakness. In relation to sexism and other forms of abuse it is seen to have great, if untapped, potential. Dorothy Jean Weaver says that forgiveness is a corporate task carried out by the gathered community. She writes that as disciples of Jesus we need to “name the brokenness in our midst, to care for those who have been victimized by sin, and. . . to claim

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forgiveness and restoration for those who have carried out *offenses against the community*" (italics mine).<sup>1</sup>

Gail Gerber Koontz speaks of a "reconciling community of faith" without internal divisions. She sees a strong role for the Christian community in empowering the injured, breaking silences, restoring trust, helping women recognize false shame and affirming their self-worth. Gail suggests that the community, which has also been betrayed by the sinner, can embody God's grace and forgive the repentant one when the injured individual is not able to do so.<sup>2</sup>

As I read this and other benevolent rhetoric about community I long to stand up and shout: *What about me? What about us?* Are broken individuals secondary to broken relationships or damage to the community? Violence or violations can indeed damage a community, but to focus on this denies the violated even the right to her own personal pain. And what does it matter if the community is damaged? Perhaps it was part of the problem.

The Mennonite community has molded many of us into doormats and made us so susceptible to abuse. It is the community that so often shelters the abuser and offers defense in the name of Christian love or for the sake of peace. It is the community that has silenced too many women for too long. Much violation has come to the fore in

recent years. We protest when we see it publicized in our Mennonite press. We do not want to acknowledge this—Oh no, not one of us! We blame the infiltration of the world—individualism—when in reality it is this very infiltration which at last has given us voice, has shattered the bonds of community that shamed us into silence. I suspect that the amount of violation and violence (be it spiritual, emotional or physical) within a Mennonite community is strongly related to the pervasiveness and the power of the community itself. The violator and the violated are not anomalies within the community—they are its products.

As individuals we must challenge both the role of community and its significance. Is community more important than the individuals that comprise it? Is this abstract entity holier than humanity? Surely, God did not create humanity to fulfill an ideal of community but rather intended community to fulfill a human need. It is humanity, not community, that was created in the image of God. In our effort to separate ourselves from the evils of the "world" we have fallen prey to idolatry—to worshipping a structure and bowing to its power.

Before community can play a role in healing and forgiveness we must see that it is not by nature a benevolent power. We must recognize that community plays a role in broken relationships and victimization, that it contributes to the false shame, the lack of self-worth, the silence, and that it carries out offenses against the individual. God created the world and all life within it—life which functions together in miraculously wonderful ways. The love of God and the peace of Christ can abound in community but it is only a vehicle; it does not contain the light.

**Janis E. Nickel is mother of Mike and Desiree, architectural designer, recent graduate of Canadian Mennonite Bible College and current student of social and economic development and women's studies at the University of Winnipeg.**

1. Dorothy Jean Weaver, "On Imitating God and Outwitting Satan: Biblical Perspectives and the Community of Faith," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* Vol. LXVIII, No. 2 (April 1994). 151–169.

2. Gail Gerber Koontz, "As We Forgive Others: Christian Forgiveness and Feminist Pain," *MQR* (April 1994). 170–193.



by Reta Halteman Finger

## Community and individual in the New Testament

Lydia Harder wonders if, in a Mennonite church that has stressed community for many generations, we have an adequate theology of the individual. It is a provocative question. I suspect we don't. Indeed, the tension between community and individual is one Christians have struggled with ever since the 18th century Enlightenment, when the concept of the individual was formally developed.

In my own life, the stability of deep roots in the Mennonite communities of eastern Pennsylvania and Virginia has enabled me to happily spend many years in less communal ecumenical or secular situations—in Presbyterian or evangelical congregations, in a Roman Catholic women's college, in Baptist and Methodist seminaries, in secular graduate schools, and working with women of many theological and denominational stripes on the magazine *Daughters of Sarah*. I know more clearly what I believe when I'm around others of different backgrounds or world views. Though I've always been proud to be Mennonite, I've often felt more loyal to our church when I'm away from it than when I'm immersed in a Mennonite community!

But in this article I want to approach the tension between community and individualism from my perspective as a student of the New Testament. In doing so, I am presuming that as Mennonites and Christians we want to remain in some continuity with scripture as a guide for our lives.

When we enter the world of the New Testament and rub shoulders with ancient Mediterranean Christians, we find that our "choirs or solos" question is the wrong one to ask. First century people had no concept of the individual or individual rights. Jesus did not come preaching the values of community over against the anonymity and independence of individualism. Far from it. The dichotomy portrayed in the Gospels is not between community and individual, but between the *hierarchical, patriarchal communities* in which almost every Greco-Roman person was bound, and the costly but *egalitarian community* into which Jesus invited such people.

Let's for a moment exchange our modern world view with that of first century Jews. There are no government social services and no graduated income tax. To have such systems in place a society must assume that it is "self-evident that all persons are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It must assume that each individual is of value. But nothing would have been less self-evident in the ancient Mediterranean world. Only the well-born, politically powerful and rich had rights. With no middle class as we know it, the remaining 90-some percent were peasants who existed for the purpose of laboring to pay taxes to keep the upper classes rich and powerful.

In the Palestine of Jesus' day, the peasant had the double burden of supporting not only their own religious and political rulers, but their Roman overlords as well. The only way to survive was within the intricate network of patronage, of which the biological extended family was a part. Patronage was not unlike the structure of the Chicago Democrat machine, where you get your job not by merit but by who you are related to or because someone higher up owes you a favor. All relationships were up-down. You gave public honor to your superior who gave you a gift or a market for your goods; and you tried to meet your obligations to those relatives or friends who were below you in honor or wealth or power, so they would in turn honor you.

The father—the patriarch—had ultimate control over his extended family. Because he was responsible for their welfare, they owed him absolute obedience. Though sons might someday hope to be patriarchs in their own households, daughters were always under the authority of a male relative. The stark alternatives were begging, prostitution or starvation.

Imagine then the upheaval Jesus caused when he called disciples away from these tight knit, oppressive structures into his wandering, egalitarian community! The sons of Zebedee left not only their fishnets, but their father, to come after Jesus (Mark 1: 19–20). Even more shocking than young men forsaking family obligations would have been women, such as those in Luke 8:1–3, who left their homes for a public life outside their normal sphere. It is hard to imagine that this did not invite strong community censure.

We know something about this movement from one kind of community to another when the disciples remind Jesus that they have left everything to follow him, and he assures them that they will receive, even in this life, "houses, brothers and

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sisters, mothers and children, and fields. . ." (Mark 10:28–31). In other words, Jesus is reconstituting the community, not by biological kinship, but by what sociologists call "fictive kinship"—people banding together to support each other even when they are not biologically related.

We know something about the egalitarian nature of this community by Jesus' teaching in Matthew 23:8–12 where he tells his disciples that they are to call no one "father" on earth, for they have only one father, who is in heaven—and they are all brothers and sisters together. We miss the power of that statement unless we realize that one's father, no matter how authoritarian, was one's means of survival. Notice how in the Markan passage above, there are no fathers (i.e. patriarchs) in the reconstituted community.

Now it is only within the egalitarian community, where all are sisters and brothers equally, that a concept of the worth of the individual can develop. Both gospels and letters in the New Testament are full of this sense of the value and preciousness of the individual. (We overlook the shock of it because our culture already assumes a concept of the individual—which was derived originally from Christianity.) Some of the most lowly or unimportant persons by ancient Greco-Roman standards are mentioned or even named in these writings. Jesus calls a child to him and says that the kingdom of God is made up of such insignificant creatures (Matt. 18: 2–5). He stops in the crush of a crowd to recognize and heal the woman with the hemorrhage on his way to the bedside of a little girl (Luke 8:40–56, par). He risks censure for straightening the back of the bent-over woman (Luke 13:10–17) and healing a man with dropsy on the Sabbath (Luke 14:1–6).

Paul, who addresses various communities in the Roman Empire, can also be very specific. Phoebe is his patron and sister; Rufus' mother was like a mother to him; and Epaphroditus and Persis are especially beloved (Rom. 16:1, 5, 12, 13). He asks for reconciliation between his friends Euodia and Syntyche, women who are valued in the Philippian church (Phil. 4:2). Few of these persons, and scores more mentioned in the New Testament, would have counted for much in the patriarchal, patronage-run households or political structures of the ancient world.

But here is where we need to translate the ancient gospel into good news for our own day. If the issue of community-and/or- individual was different for Jesus than it is for us today, how do we take the New Testament seriously when our present underlying assumptions are so different?

Actually, some things are not all that different. We know that, in spite of our democratic society in which equality is the ideal, much patriarchy and hierarchy still remain. Some of the last holdouts are the institutions of family and religion, which tend to conserve hierarchical behavior. We need to use the New Testament concept of the egalitarian community and its corollary of the value of each individual to evaluate the communities and structures to which we belong. If those communities value authoritarian rule over the worth and development of individuals, they are not taking seriously the call of Jesus to egalitarian community. If they tolerate abuse or injustice to "the little ones," whoever they might be, we should not forget Jesus' harsh words about millstones and drowning (Matt. 18:6). As followers of Jesus, we have a duty to protest and call for changes. In some cases, it may mean, and has meant, leaving the security of one community for the freedom and insecurity of something new.

Since domestic violence is such a critical issue in our culture, we might wrestle with how Jesus' call to fictive kinship and egalitarian community addresses power imbalances and exploitation in present-day Mennonite families or other relationships in the church or parachurch organizations. Since Jesus' call penetrates families and sometimes sets a sword between one member and another (Matt. 10:34–36; Luke 12:51–53), we can infer that under the reign of God, some things take precedence over unquestioning submission to unequal relationships within the traditional family. How might this translate into today's culture where battered women and children have potentially more options than those of Jesus' day?

We must not forget that the New Testament concept of the individual is never seen apart from the egalitarian community, whose only authority is the "father" in heaven. Thus contemporary Christians need to provide egalitarian structures within which those abused by human authoritarianism can claim their individuality and worth. The real tension is not between community and individual, between choir and solo. It is between hierarchical and egalitarian communities. In the latter, there is room for *both* choir and solos.

**Reta Halteman Finger recently resigned as editor of *Daughters of Sarah*, and is presently working on her doctoral dissertation, which deals with communal meals in the early Jerusalem church, according to Acts 2:42–57 and 6:1–6.**



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by Muriel Bechtel

## Will her voice be heard in the community?

Travelling home from the Women Doing Theology conference in Bluffton last summer, I was struck by how differently four women, all Mennonite and of similar ages, could experience the same event. Back and forth across the car, our contradictory thoughts and emotions ricocheted off each other. It was as if the intensity of our conversation was propelling us all the way back to Toronto, as we rehearsed and reacted and argued about what we had seen and heard.

Clearly we saw the issues and events of the conference through different eyes and responded with vastly different feelings. Each one of us brought to this conversation our own perspectives, shaped by our own personal stories and the issues and situations of our various communities.

For me that conversation in the car was a vivid image of what has happened to the feminist community. A decade or two ago things were different. Many of us were celebrating women's solidarity with each other and the ways in which our communities differed from the communities men form. But in more recent years other women have begun to speak up, telling us that this "feminist community" does not always speak for them.

These new voices remind us that white, middle class, educated elite women, who have defined much of the feminist agenda, do not reflect the priorities and perspectives of all women. Among the emerging voices are women of color, women with differences in education, women who have experienced violence, women of various sexual orientations, and women of different classes. Gradually the feminist community where many of us discovered solidarity and nurtured our new-found identity has become fragmented, and many diverse communities have emerged, each of them faced with trying again to define their own identity and vision.

It seems to me that this sequence of events is common in the life cycle of communities. In the mid-twentieth century, with the recovery of the Anabaptist vision, the Mennonite church gained a new sense of identity and status, not only on the North American religious scene, but also among its own members. But before long women and other marginalized



persons began to remind the church that from their place on the edges they experienced such basic emphases as community, discipleship and pacifism differently than those who were in positions of power and influence at the center.

To marginal people these aspects of the Anabaptist vision were often oppressive and restrictive, not liberating and empowering. Gradually as some of these voices grew strong enough to be heard, the coherent vision that had given such a sense of new life and identity to the Mennonite community began to fragment, facing each of these fragments with the task of defining and clarifying its own identity.

Initially most communities form around foundational stories and common experiences. It seems that in the beginning period of a community's formation, members often minimize individual differences in order to be able to build a strong cohesive identity. Gradually as their common stories and experiences become regarded as normative, the community's leaders and theologians begin to develop theologies and practices to support them. Thus the community's normative story, theology and practices take shape. However, in the process things may also become more inflexible and institutionalized, making it more and more difficult for individual members to challenge the community and to say, "This does not speak for me."

Most persons, particularly those in urban settings, spend a great deal of energy trying to find or create a community of kindred spirits, people who share a common faith, who have had similar life experiences and who share their values. It is not surprising that established members or leaders often resent the individual voices which challenge those values, beliefs and practices on which their community is based. Often they will react by defending those norms and the practices around which they formed, and become angry at any individuals who question them.

However I fear that communities who write off such individuals will lose the critical, creative and prophetic voices that have the potential to awaken in them new and

**"I think the crucial question is whether our communities are open or closed to listening to the voices of individuals, particularly those who disagree with them."**

**"How often Jesus listened and responded to the needs of individuals rather than following the laws and norms of his Jewish community to the letter!"**

life-affirming ways of participating in God's purposes. Whether the established members are the community's official leaders or have an informal privileged status because of their history, informal social connections, wealth, education or other factors, too often they fail to acknowledge the truths spoken by the individuals who see things differently.

Mistakenly, in my opinion, these established members often pose the conflict as individualism versus commitment to community. The issue is not whether we value the community or the individual more. I think the crucial question is whether our communities are open or closed to listening to the voices of individuals, particularly those who disagree with them.

At the heart of a Christian community's vision and life, I believe, there must be a concern for persons as individuals, and especially for those individuals who are among "the least of these," and therefore often have a perspective that is at odds with the status quo. Concern for the individual is different than individualism. The individualist claims that the community must ensure each individual's rights, without regard for issues of power and privilege. Most individualists do not acknowledge that the net effect of individualism is often that the most powerful are the ones whose rights are protected in the community, at the expense of those who have less power.

In contrast, the Christian community, in the tradition of its founder, maintains that each individual, no matter how small and insignificant she may be, is created and loved by God, and has important perspectives to contribute to the entire community. Such a community puts "the least of these" or the "little people" at its center, encouraging them to share their unique concerns that may conflict with the accepted norms. Often "little people" see some things more clearly than "big people" can. Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples, "it is to such as these (little children) that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14).

We who value Christian community highly, whether Anabaptist or feminist, sometimes come to believe that our normative beliefs and practices are completely consistent with God's purposes. But I would contend that more often God's divine intentions for our human communities become covered over, encrusted and almost hidden by our norms.

I think Jesus addressed that phenomenon in the Jewish community when he said: "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfil" (Matthew 5:17). I think Jesus wanted his

listeners to see beneath the thick layers of accumulated Jewish traditions, and to return again to the divine purposes at the heart of the law and prophets. Often in the Gospels it was one of "the least of these" individuals who caused that to happen. In Mark 7:24-30 it was an outsider, a Syro-Phoenician woman, who challenged Jesus to see beneath the community's norms and to remember again what was at the heart of God's purposes.

How often Jesus listened and responded to the needs of individuals rather than following the laws and norms of his Jewish community to the letter! He disregarded sabbath laws to heal the bent-over woman (Luke 13:10-17) and the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:16), thus fulfilling what God intended in creating the laws concerning the sabbath—that people would be free from their bondage (Luke 13:16). To the accusers and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) Jesus held up concerns that came closer to reflecting the heart of God than would have happened by following the law to the letter. Jesus reminded the accusers from her community that they were as guilty of sin as the woman was, and assured the woman that it was more important that she "sin no more" than that she receive the community's punishment required by the law.

Jesus was not afraid to concede that sometimes the "little people" uncovered perspectives that "big people" could not see from their privileged position in the community. By his words and actions he often tried to get the members and leaders who were in positions of privilege and power to see through the eyes of individuals who were on the margins, and thereby brought the community to a deeper understanding of God's purposes.

I believe our Christian communities are called to cultivate habits of encouraging and listening carefully to the individuals who challenge us, and to respect and consider their viewpoints rather than silencing them. I am also convinced that the measure of a Christian community is in its willingness to hear and to be responsive to all of its different members, but particularly to "the least of these." I am convinced that the community that cultivates these habits will discover that often these are the voices that enable us to see even more deeply into the expansive heart of God.

**Muriel Bechtel is a pastor at Warden Woods Mennonite Church in Scarborough, Ont., and studying in the doctor of ministry program at the Toronto School of Theology. Her primary interest has been in systems theory with a particular focus on self-differentiation for persons in an urban Mennonite congregation. Muriel is married to Dave and has two young adult children, Greg and Krista.**

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by Rose Barg

## Depth Perception

There is something  
to be said  
for the experience  
of seeing things  
differently  
from each eye.

One, once blind  
now sees  
in the vibrant colour  
of youth.

The other, aged  
and yellowed  
in its perception  
knows wisdom from  
years of seeing  
what is.

Both are in search of truth  
yet cannot agree on  
what is  
real.



Perhaps in the end  
these eyes will know  
only that truth  
does not exist  
in one dimension . . .

that wisdom  
is in the knowledge  
that truth  
from a single perspective  
lacks depth.

Rose Barg works as a  
therapist and educational  
consultant in the Toronto  
area. She is married and is  
the mother of three children.

#### Women's Concerns committee seeks new member

The MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns (CWC) is seeking names of women from General Conference churches willing to be the new GC representative to the committee. Members of CWC

meet twice yearly to help set agenda for the committee and the staff person; MCC pays travel and committee costs. For more information contact Tina Mast Burnett, MCC, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; telephone 717-859-3889; fax 717-859-3875. Applications due by September 1.

## Bibliography

Following is a representative list of resources that may be helpful on this topic.

1. *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, edited by Lois Y. Barrett (April, 1994).  
This issue contains the articles presented at the second Women Doing Theology conference, held in June 1994 at Bluffton College. References in some of the articles are to this conference.
2. *The Conrad Grebel Review*, edited by Arnold Snyder (Winter 1992)  
Contains papers from the first Women Doing Theology conference held at Conrad Grebel College in 1992.
3. *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, edited by Elizabeth G. Yoder. Institute of Mennonite Studies Occasional Papers, No. 16, Elkhart, IN 1992.  
Papers presented at a gathering of theologians and therapists, October 1991, at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, to consult of the subject of violence against women.
4. *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, editors Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engels, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).  
These essays represent the cries of protest from the underside of the church.
5. *Sexual Paradox* by Celia Allison Hahn, (Pilgrim Press, New York, 1991).  
This book recognizes the tension between male and female voices in the church and encourages us to make this tension a creative one.
6. *Family Violence: The Compassionate Church Responds* by Melissa A. Miller, (Waterloo and Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1994).  
A practical book which encourages the community to become a healing community for all its members.
7. *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* by Letty M. Russell (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Press, 1993).  
This theological and practical discussion of the church images the church community as a common table of hospitality where all who gather around it become partners in its task.

## New publications

*Peace—Just Live It!* by Christine Neufeld was developed by MCC Canada to address the real issues youth face in living Christ's message of peace and reconciliation. It connects biblical teaching and stories of the Christian peace heritage with current topics. Neufeld is a recent graduate of the University of Manitoba and a volunteer with Project Peacemakers in Winnipeg. Publisher is Faith and Life Press.

*Praying with the Anabaptists* by Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall is a collection of 15 meditations, drawn from centuries-old Anabaptist tradition, containing scripture, stories, prayers and guided- prayer exercises that help reveal the secret of bearing spiritual fruit. The book comes in a boxed set with a cassette of over 20 hymns enrich and deepen the spiritual experience. Published by Faith and Life Press, Newton, Kan.

*Little Stories for Little Children* is a new Herald Press book by Donna McKee Rhodes. This collection of 52 short children's stories is a resource for adults seeking devotional materials for children. It can be used in the family and in children's worship settings in the congregation. Rhodes is minister of nurture at Stone Church of the Brethren in Huntingdon, Pa.

*No Longer Alone: Mental Health and the Church* is a new Herald Press book by John Toews with Eleanor Loewen. Topics include interrelatedness of social, emotional, physical and spiritual selves; emotions that hurt or heal; depression; addictions, schizophrenia; grief and suicide. The book includes questions for group discussion.

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**Book review**

## A busy woman's guide to the bookstore

*Women's Work: A Guide to Growth and Self-Discovery*,  
by Anne Baxter and Nora O. Lozano-Diaz (Herald Press,  
Scottsdale, PA, 120 pages)

"The world is waiting for the daughters of God to be revealed!"

—Anne Baxter, *Women's Work*

Walk into your local bookstore and head to the women's studies section—no dearth here of titles about women's ways of knowing, about power issues, about the patriarchy. Browse the psychology and self-help sections, the health and wellness sections—no lack there of advice on dealing with anger, raising self-esteem, improving body image, understanding sexuality and analyzing family. Move on to the spirituality and inspiration books—with a little bit of weeding, you can find here dozens of ideas about women and spirituality, women and the church, images of God. Unless you have several hours to browse, then several more hours to read all the books that strike your fancy, you're overwhelmed!

Among all these books is a new title called *Women's Work*. The key to this book's usability is not that it provides one more exhaustive study of issues related to women (it certainly whets the appetite), but that it provides a connective resource for several different books related to many of the basic issues you might discuss with your women's group. Reading it is like talking to a well-read friend; each chapter includes a list of related works, and the authors frequently quote these books and tie their ideas to concepts in the related works.

*Women's Work* is meant as a resource for group study, as a basis for discussion and reflection. To this end, each chapter closes with a list of discussion questions that refer to the issues developed in the chapter. Many of these questions make good prompts for reflective journal writing.

The book begins by looking at women's learning styles, family issues, self-image, sexuality, relationships and emotional make-up. Each chapter defines the issue or

problem, then suggests practical ways to work at changing situations and attitudes.

*Women's Work* is valuable not only as a tool for sparking conversation in group discussions, but also as a basic reference to help you find your way through the maze of interesting titles in your bookstore.

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Weaver-Kreider, Lancaster, Pa.

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**Book Review**

## Understanding Romans

*Paul and the Roman House Churches* by Reta Halteman Finger, Herald Press, 1993.

This delightful book offers readers a fresh approach to the book of Romans by focusing on the world of first century Rome and the house churches which received Paul's letter read by Phoebe.

Reta Halteman Finger does a masterful job of helping 20th century Christians understand the diversity and tensions present in Roman house churches. Readers are invited to assume specific roles: Jew and Greek, slave and free, man and woman, liberal and conservative, in order to better understand the meaning and impact of Paul's letter. Finger offers much help along the way, including character sketches, historical context, outlines of specific passages, and questions for discussion.

This book is helpful to the individual reader, but will spring to life best when used in a small group. If the group is diverse in age, education, race and gender, so much the better! This will only help the group better understand and struggle with Paul's concern for unity when disagreements may be strong.

A happy by-product of this book is a strong curiosity about the people and the settings which received Paul's other letters. While the reader may not have all the recent scholarship available from places like Corinth or Ephesus, Finger's study of Romans provides the reader with a stimulating model for biblical study.

—Reviewed by Titus Peachey, Lancaster, Pa.

## Letters

For three years now I have lived in Germany, after moving from Edmonton, Alta. I really enjoy the *Report*. You are doing a great job in helping women all over feel closer together [as we share] similar problems and how with the love of others and God, we can be helped. The *Report* has sure opened my eyes to other women's situations.

—Dorothea Kremner, Solingen, Germany

I read Linda Holland's article with interest (March-April 1995 issue), being something like a one-generation Mennonite, also from the Franconia conference.

Yes, community is experienced in church, a spiritual community which melds with the community of family and ethnicity to create links and cross-links that those of us from the outside will never experience.

Why should it be any different? It is important to take care of family and lifetime friends, if we are blessed with having them nearby. And as in any big family, communication isn't always going to be direct, because it is so easy to offend others through the cross links.

There is a special blessing that comes with being part of a community that you are not "from." Part of the blessing comes from being enough of an outsider to be able to feel the call and have the time to bring other outsiders into the community. We have the space in our lives to create community with others not fully integrated.

Part of the blessing comes from the realization that our earthly community is still being perfected, by God's work through and among us. We suffer no illusion that we have arrived; we continue to look above for the time that we will experience community in perfection.

Part of the blessing comes from the freedom, as an outsider, to be more easily prophetic. We can speak, we can challenge, as God more easily leads us, and we might be labeled "angry women" or anything else. But we, as outsiders, don't fear losing our relationship with Great-Grandma and her siblings'

## Women at Wichita '95

The Peace Factory at Wichita '95, July 24–30, will include activities and performances on the Peace Factory Stage for adults and children. There will be several events featuring women performers, as well as a special vigil to remember survivors of abuse. The schedule was not final at press time. For a complete program of activities, contact Tina Mast Burnett, MCC Women's Concerns, 717-859-3889; or pick up a program at the peace factory when you arrive at Wichita.

Women's Missionary and Service Commission (WMSC) and Women in Mission (WM) also plan some joint activities at Wichita. A joint open forum on "Questions about women's groups" will be Thursday from noon to 2 p.m. A woman's dinner will be Thursday at 5:15 p.m. The WM/WMSC joint delegate business meeting will be Friday from noon to 2 p.m. All women are invited to these events.

descendants; we don't fear losing our entire economic base of support; we can "re-evaluate our place in the congregation" without risking everything we've ever known and loved. Very freeing for a prophetic voice.

And do we really want a community that can integrate all of us as we are? A community that has no theological identity, that doesn't care if we are pacifists or believe in the deity of Christ? I was also baptized as an infant, and felt that being rebaptized would imply that the first baptism wasn't valid. For our adopted Mennonite church, adult baptism was required for membership. I like them even more for not changing their theology to accommodate my identity. And my theology is not something that I would change to join a group. Thus, I am "something like" a one-generation Mennonite, but not quite. Not a member, but an "associate," given love and friendship and fellowship, and also a voice.

—Janet Panning, MCC Jamaica

### Women in ministry

**Libby Caes** was ordained May 7 as co-pastor of West Philadelphia (Pa.) Mennonite Fellowship.

**Jane Roeschley** is serving as Central District interim regional conference minister for Iowa and Missouri, beginning May 1.

**Ruth Naylor** is serving as Central District interim conference minister, beginning May 1.

## News and verbs

- A **Women Doing Theology** conference is planned for May 9–11, 1996, in Winnipeg, Man. The planning committee is looking for suggestions for workshop topics and leaders. Please share your ideas with: Kathleen Hull, MCC Canada, 134 Plaza Dr., Winnipeg, MB R3T 5K9; telephone 204-261-6381; fax 204-269-9875.
- Dale Taylor of Winnipeg, Man., has been named **new associate executive director of MCC Canada**. Her assignment, which will begin in July, includes coordinating MCC Canada's communication, development education, fundraising and Canadian program activities. Taylor taught English in China with China Educational Exchange for two years, and has been an assistant professor of theology and director of student development at Concord College.
- Janeen Bertsche Johnson has been named **community life minister and director of continuing education** at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind., beginning August 15. She currently is associate pastor at Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita, Kan.
- Carol J. Farran, DNSc, RN, a member of Lombard (Ill.) Mennonite Church, recently co-authored a book with Kaye Herth, PhD, RN, and Judy Popovich, DNSc, RN, called ***Hope and Hopelessness: Critical Clinical Constructs***. The book, written for nursing, medical, social work, pastors and other health professionals, includes an exploration of the conceptual and theoretical issues underlying hope and hopelessness, an examination of how each construct has been measured and assessed in clinical settings, and a review of existing research on these constructs. It offers health care professionals a tool for the assessment and care of persons affected by the opposing—but equally compelling—constructs. It is available from Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif.

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- **Can restorative justice work for victims of domestic violence?** A new computer conference sponsored by MCC Canada's Victim-Offender Ministries and Women's Concerns programs and the Winnipeg-based Voices for Non-Violence will give people across North America a chance to discuss the issue electronically. To participate in the conference write to Restorative Justice and Abuse, P.O. Box 2038, Clearbrook BC V2T 3T8; fax 604-850-8734; or contact Heather Block at [mccmbvnn@web.apc.org](mailto:mccmbvnn@web.apc.org).
- Two retreats for **female survivors of sexual abuse** are planned in Pennsylvania for fall 1995.
  - 1) Women from Franconia and Eastern District Conferences have planned **"On the Journey: Reclaiming our Giftedness,"** to be Oct. 27-29 at Hemlock Springs, near Reading, Pa. This retreat is planned to provide a faith community for nurture, healing and empowerment on the way to wholeness with God and self. Enrollment is limited; for information contact: Pastor Rosie Epp, Zion Mennonite Church, Box 495, Souderton PA 18964; 215-723-3592.
  - 2) **"Healing: Restoration in God's Presence,"** will be in November at Kenbrook Bible Camp in Lebanon, Pa. It will include workshops, worship and process groups. It is sponsored by a joint committee of Lancaster/Harrisburg (Pa.) area Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women, and follows a similar retreat held last November. For information write to: Spring of Hope, Box 69, Akron, PA 17501. Both retreats are co-sponsored by MCC U.S. Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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